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ANTHROPOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

December 11, 2006

Anthropologists weigh in on Iraq, torture at annual meeting

A complete end to all U.S. military operations in Iraq and full U.S. compliance with the United Nations Convention against Torture were among the measures called for in two resolutions advanced by members of the American Anthropological Association at its recent annual meeting in San Jose, Calif. The resolutions reflected discontent within the anthropology community on aspects of current U.S. foreign policy, and marked a spirited grassroots effort among rank-and-file AAA members to shape an association position on the Iraq war and the use of torture.

Passage of the two resolutions at the AAA business meeting on November 18 triggered, pursuant to AAA bylaws, a balloting procedure by which they are to be voted on by the membership in May 2007. Should a majority of members vote to support the resolutions, they would become official AAA policy.

The resolutions emerged against a backdrop of deepening debate on the nature and course of anthropological engagement in the national security sector. Chief among the concerns of the resolutions' sponsors - Roberto Gonzalez, associate professor of anthropology at San Jose State University, and Kanhong Lin, a doctoral candidate in anthropology at American University - is the widely-held notion that specific anthropological works on Middle Eastern culture were used by U.S. military/intelligence personnel to inform torture and interrogation practices at Abu Ghraib, Iraq. Meanwhile, the AAA appointed a special commission earlier this year to examine the roles anthropologists assume in national security and intelligence work, and to offer guidance on ethical and professional responsibility issues such as secrecy, clandestine research, and anthropologists' obligations to those they study.

As if to underscore the profound interest anthropologists are taking in these questions at an historical moment rife with complex global challenges, this year's AAA annual meeting adopted the theme "Critical Intersections/Dangerous Issues." The meeting, accordingly, featured a range of sessions that are emblematic of the times - on the balance between security and human rights, critical perspectives on the "war on terror", the anthropology of terrorism, Islamic public spheres since 9/11, and several others. AAA president Alan H. Goodman - an ex-officio member of the special commission and a co-architect of the 2006 annual meeting, welcomed the emphasis on the discipline's importance and relevance in these arenas, noting that "Now is arguably the most dangerous and most critical moment in history. If anthropology is to collectively figure out its role in building a more just world, it needs to act fast."

The two resolutions, one condemning the U.S. occupation of Iraq and the other condemning torture and its use by U.S. forces, assert U.S. violations of Chapter VII of the UN Charter and of the UN Convention against Torture, as well as U.S. anti-torture laws and criminal code provisions. Each resolution also weighed in on more discipline-specific concerns, namely noting the destruction and looting of Iraq's historical, cultural and archaeological heritage, and denouncing the use of anthropological knowledge as an element of torture.

The significance of the resolutions' passage - above and beyond the topical content - was partly framed by the fact that a quorum of AAA members (more than the required 250) was in attendance at the business meeting, an atypical circumstance for AAA business meetings in recent years. The grassroots character of the scene hinted at broadening rank-and-file interest in expanding the AAA public policy role, something Goodman is grateful to see. "The business meeting was a thrillingly palpable example of democracy in action," he said.

Founded in 1902, the American Anthropological Association is the world's largest professional organization of anthropologists and others interested in anthropology, with an average annual membership of more than 10,000. The Arlington, Va.-based association represents all specialties within anthropology - cultural anthropology, biological (or physical) anthropology, archaeology, linguistics and applied anthropology.

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